

A FALL RECORD OF THE SHARP-TAILED SPARROW FOR INTERIOR CALIFORNIA

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In the early morning of 22 September 1990 we, along with Thomas E. Wurster, observed a Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) at Furnace Creek Ranch, Death Valley National Monument, Inyo County, California. It was seen feeding in the weeds and resting in the scrubby tamarisks surrounding a small pond in the northwestern corner of the golf course. The lack of wind and the warm and clear conditions allowed us to study the bird closely through binoculars for 20 minutes.

In size and shape the bird was like a Grasshopper Sparrow (*A. savannarum*), being small and chunky with a flat crown, having a short tail with pointed retrices, and flying weakly on short wings. The bill was mostly dark, conical, and rather fine. The most striking feature was the bright orange on the face and breast. The face was boldly patterned with a wide orange supercilium, which tapered to a point behind the eye, a distinctly contrasting mouse-gray auricular patch, orange lores, and a blackish postocular stripe that thickened as it approached the nape. Pale orange on the throat contrasted slightly with the brighter orange across the breast. Fine black streaks crossed the breast, although the center of the breast appeared to be unstreaked. Black streaking on the flanks was bolder and a bit heavier. The belly looked clean white; we never obtained a clear view of the undertail coverts. The crown was very dark, with a gray central stripe and black lateral crown stripes, although this gray central stripe was difficult to see since it was nearly as dark as the lateral crown stripes. The nape was unmarked mouse-gray, sharply offsetting the dark crown and back and the orange face. The back was deep blackish with bold white stripes. The wings were wholly warm grayish-brown with a trace of wingbars and darker tertials edged whitish. We never saw the rump well. All specimens from the Pacific Coast have been reported as *A. c. nelsoni* from central North America; our bird showed the indistinct breast streaks and the very bold back stripes characteristic of this subspecies. The similar race *A. c. altera*, which breeds around James Bay and winters along the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Mexico, cannot be eliminated, however, although it is less likely to reach California.

The Sharp-tailed Sparrow breeds east of the Rocky Mountains throughout the prairie provinces of Canada and the north-central Great Plains of the United States, south to southeastern South Dakota. Disjunct breeding populations inhabit the Atlantic seaboard from southeastern Quebec south to North Carolina (A.O.U. 1983). The Atlantic populations are essentially resident, particularly from New York south. However, the populations breeding inland and around Hudson Bay migrate south to the Gulf of Mexico, wintering along the coast from Texas to southern Florida (A.O.U. 1983). In tidal marshes along the Pacific coast, small numbers have been found wintering annually in recent years, with records extending from Humboldt Bay, California (Morlan and Erickson 1988) south to Bahía de San Quintín, Baja California Norte (Northern 1962), and from 17 October to 6 May (Roberson 1980). Since the Sharp-tailed Sparrow has proved regular in California, the species was recently removed from the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) review list (Dunn 1988).

Despite its extensive seasonal movements through the central United States, the species is seldom detected during migration. Even though it winters regularly in California, the Sharp-tailed Sparrow is "virtually unrecorded in the west away from coastal areas" (A.O.U. 1983). West of the Rocky Mountains, there are records only for California and Baja California. Montana and Colorado are the only other states west of the species' normal migration route for which there are valid records (DeSante and Pyle 1986).

NOTES

In California, vagrants have been noted along the coast away from wintering localities on occasion, with the earliest being 29 - 30 September 1988 at the Santa Clara River estuary, Ventura County (McCaskie 1989). Inland, there are four records of spring vagrants, all from the deserts. Two of these records are for 1976, when single birds were observed at Oasis, Mono County, 25 - 26 May and at Furnace Creek Ranch 27 - 29 May (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The other two occurrences took place in Kern County during the spring of 1990: one was observed at Mojave 13 May and one was seen and photographed at Galileo Hill 20 - 24 May (McCaskie 1990). The only other record for the interior of California is unreviewed by the CBRC: one was reported on the Colorado River at Imperial Dam, Imperial County, 29 March 1975 (Garrett and Dunn 1981). This individual most probably wintered at this location. There are no previous fall records away from the coast. Thus, the 22 September sighting we report here is not only the first fall record for interior California, it is also the earliest for the state by a week.

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